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# Prosody and specificity-bias in recognizing dialogue-specific functions of speech acts. Evidence from Polish[1]

## 1. Introduction

The primary function of an utterance is underdetermined by its lexical and grammatical properties. As Wilson and Sperber (2012: 216; cf. Jary and Kissine 2014) argue, for instance, imperative sentences are specialised for describing certain states of affairs as both potential and desirable; normally, however, this linguistically specified function of an imperative utterance is fine-tuned or pragmatically enriched by the hearer in order to determine the occasion-specific force intended by the speaker — e.g. *commanding*, *requesting*, *advising*, or *permitting* — which falls into the speech act potential associated with the imperative mood. There are also cases of *indirect* (Searle 1979; Pinker et al. 2008) and *direct though non-literal* (Bach and Harnish 1979) speech in which the main function of an utterance goes beyond the limits determined by its speech act potential and, respectively, supplements or substitutes its linguistically indicated force. For instance, the primary point behind an interrogative utterance may be to *make a request* by asking a question about one's ability (Searle 1979; Asher and Lascarides 2001) or even to perform a certain *non-literal speech act* (Bach and Harnish 1979) without asking a genuine question at all; by analogy, the intended force of an explicit performative utterance of the form 'I promise I will do *A*' may be making a warning or a threat rather than a promise (Searle 1969: 58).

Quite often the occasion-specific function of an utterance reflects the role it plays in the ongoing discourse. By way of illustration, consider the following three dialogues.

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(1) a. A: I want to catch the 10:20 train to London.

b. B: Go to platform 1.

(2) a. A: I want to buy the latest Matthew Halsall album.

B: Have you checked at the record store around the corner?

(3) a. A: Clean up your room!

b. B: Mom, I am busy now.

c. A: Clean it up!

d. Dad is coming soon!

According to Asher and Lascarides (2001: 206), from whom we borrow example (1), the discursive function of B's utterance of (1b) is not to get A to go to platform 1, but to represent the action of going there as part of a plan to achieve the goal associated with A's utterance of (1a), i.e., to catch the 10:20 train to London. Analogously, the primary function behind B's utterance of (2b) is not so much to find out whether A has been at the store around the corner, as to give him an idea where he may buy the latest Matthew Halsall album. The primary function of A's utterance of (3d), in turn, corresponds to the role it plays in her *ad baculum* argument (Budzyńska and Witek 2014): it is not to merely assert that Dad is coming soon, but to make a threat for the purpose of persuading B to clean his room up. In sum, the primary functions of the conversational moves made in uttering (1b), (2b) and (3d) are constituted in the course and for the sake of dialogues (1), (2) and (3), respectively; in short, they are *dialogue-specific* or *dialogue-bound*.

Normally, to facilitate the recognition of the primary function of her utterance, the speaker provides the hearer with a number of cues which interact with the linguistically encoded information and "guide the hearer in the inferential construction of higher-level explicatures" — i.e., in inferring the intended force or attitude behind her utterance — "by narrowing the search space, increasing the salience of certain candidates, and diminishing the salience of others." (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 24) Some of these cues are non-verbal and take the form of facial expressions (Domaneschi et al. 2017); others are prosodic and involve pitch range, intonation contour, affective intonation, and other linguistic as well as non-linguistic signs, signals, and codes (Wharton 2003, 2009, 2012).

To date, most of the research on the role of prosodic information in verbal comprehension has concentrated on such topics as irony (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 143-144; Noveck 2018: 206-208), presuppositions (Schwarz 2019: 111-112), focus (Kim 2019), information structure (Tonhauser 2019), turn-taking (de Ruiter 2019), and other phenomena

studied by pragmatics and discourse analysis. Interestingly, the idea of prosodic force-indicating devices plays a role in the theory of speech acts since its origins. For instance, John L. Austin mentions tone of voice, cadence, and emphasis among the "numerous speech-devices which have always been used with greater or less success to" (Austin 1975: 73) make clearer the force or function of a speech act. In a similar vein, Julia Hirschberg notes that "[t]here is a considerable evidence that full intonational contours can, in the appropriate context, signal syntactic *mood*, *speech act*, or speaker attitude" (Hirschberg 2017: 546, italics in the original).

Our objective in this paper is to evaluate the role of prosodic information in inferring *dialogue-specific* functions of speech acts performed in particular discursive contexts. Our focus, then, is not on the well-researched prosodic indicators of general kinds of illocutionary forces such as assertions, questions, and orders (for discussion and references, see Wharton 2012 and Hirschberg 2017), which are standardly associated with three basic syntactic types of sentences: indicative, interrogative, and imperative, correspondingly. Rather, we want to test how prosodic cues provided by the speaker affect the recognition of the highly specialized role that her utterance plays in the ongoing discourse. To this end, we designed and carried out a pilot empirical study in which participants were exposed to recordings of certain target utterances and, next, were asked to recognize discursive contexts from which the recordings came. More specifically, in each trial a participant (*i*) was asked to read carefully two different dialogues which had one sentence in common; next, he or she (*ii*) was presented with a recording of an utterance of the common sentence and (*iii*) asked to decide from which of the two dialogues the heard utterance came. We assume that the participant's decision manifests his or her implicit understanding of the dialogue-specific function of the target utterance. We also believe that the above-described procedure enables us to measure the accuracy of the participants' decisions and thereby evaluate the efficiency of prosodic clues in inferring dialogue-specific functions of target utterances independently of whether the participants are able to represent these functions in conscious thought and provide their accurate verbal description.

The main hypothesis to be tested in this study, then, is that ($h_1$) prosodic cues are effective indicators of specialized illocutionary forces; more specifically, we expect that in the majority of cases participants in the study will use prosodic information effectively to recognize dialogue-specific functions of speech acts. The data we collected seem to confirm hypothesis ($h_1$). Our study reveals, however, that for some target utterances there were a considerable number of *failed cases* in which participants misrecognized actual forces of

speech acts; in short, in some cases prosodic cues provided by speakers turned out to be ineffective. In our view, however, at least some of the failed cases exhibit a common pattern that can be described in terms of differences in specificity between alternative speech act ascriptions available to participants. Our second hypothesis, then, is that ($h_2$) occasion-specific functions are prioritised in interpretation over general ones; in other words, discourse participants who have to choose between pragmatically fine-tuned and linguistically indicated speech act ascriptions exhibit a preference for the former rather than for the latter.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we present the theoretical background of our study; in particular, we discuss the notion of the *primary* force of a speech act (Searle 1979; Jaszczolt 2016) and the phenomenon of linguistic underdeterminacy (Wilson and Sperber 2012; Carston 2002; Witek 2015b); we also use elements of Asher and Lascarides's (2001, 2003) rhetorical structure model to elaborate on the idea of dialogue-specific functions and to justify the procedure employed in the study. In Section 3, we present the study design and, next, in Section 4, we report the obtained results and discuss the extent to which they can be regarded as confirming hypothesis ($h_1$). In Section 5, we focus on some of the failed cases revealed in the study — which illustrate what we propose to call the *specificity-bias effect* — and put forth hypothesis ($h_2$) as their possible explanation. Section 6 offers a summary of the obtained results and presents suggestions for future research on specificity bias and prosodic indicators of dialogue-specific functions.

## 2. The primary function of a speech act and linguistic underdeterminacy

The function of a speech act can be defined by reference to how its performance affects the state of conversation represented as *conversational score* (Lewis 1979) or *conversational record* (Thomason et al. 2006; Lepore and Stone 2015). For instance, an individual utterance constitutes a successful act of offending the hearer, amusing the audience, or making fun of a third party only if it modifies the state of conversation by getting the hearer to feel offended, getting the audience to be amused, or presenting the third party in a ridiculous light, respectively. In particular, the function of an utterance which constitutes an illocutionary act — i.e., its *illocutionary force* — is characterised by reference to how the utterance affects the domain of normative facts such as commitment, obligations, rights, and entitlements of the participants in social life (Austin 1975; Sbisà 2007, 2013; Witek 2015c, 2019, 2021). For instance, an utterance of "I will do *A*" takes effect as a felicitous promise

only if it brings about the speaker's commitment to do *A* and the hearer's right to expect her to perform this action or even reproach her if she fails to fulfil her promise; by analogy an utterance of "Do *B*!" constitutes an act of issuing an order only if it results in the hearer's being committed to do *B* and the hearer's right to expect her to comply with what she is told.

Our aim in this paper is not to discuss different types of verbal actions such as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Sbisà 2013). The general idea underlying the proposed study is that speaking is *doing things with words* (Austin 1975) and that the function of a speech act is to be defined by reference to its characteristic effect which may, but do not have to be, normative. In particular, we assume that the characteristic or essential effect of a conversational contribution can be described in terms of the constraints it puts on the scope of felicitous moves that can be subsequently made or, in other words, in terms of verbal and non-verbal responses it invites "by convention" (Austin 1975: 117; for a more extensive discussion, see Witek 2015a, 2019).

Some conversational contributions can be ascribed two or more different functions. For instance, an utterance of sentence (4):

(4) Can you pass the salt?

can take effect both as a *question* and a *request* (Searle 1979); that is to say, the hearer can felicitously respond to it by *saying* "Yes, I can" and *passing* the salt, thereby exploiting the fact that the speaker's utterance constitutes two speech acts of different illocutionary types (Asher and Lascarides 2001). By analogy, an utterance of sentence (5b):

(5) A: a. Let's go to the movies tonight.
B: b. I have to study for an exam. (Searle 1979: 33)

can take effect as *refusing* A's suggestion and as *informing* that B has to study for an exam or even *explaining* B's refusal.

According to some scholars (Gazdar 1981), one of the forces of a multifunctional utterance is literal in that it is "built into sentence form" (Levinson 1983: 263). For instance, Bach and Harnish (1979: 11) claim that the literal force of a speech act is "*locutionary-compatible* (*L-compatible*) with the sentence type and meaning of" the expression uttered by the speaker.

> An utterance's being a prediction is L-compatible with the sentence used only if the sentence contains future time reference. If that sentence contains an action verb predicted of [the speaker], then the force of the utterance is L-compatible with the sentence whether the sentence is used to make a promise or make a prediction. An utterance's being a request or an order is L-compatible only with imperative sentences; analogously, an utterance's being a question is L-compatible only with interrogative sentences. (Bach and Harnish 1979: 11)

In other words, the grammatical mood of a sentence can be regarded as encoding its speech act potential, i.e., the range of illocutionary forces with which it can be literally uttered (Harnish 1994). According to Searle (1969, 1979, 1989), in turn, the literal force of an explicit performative utterance, e.g., 'I promise I will do A', is indicated by its main verb, e.g., 'promise'. In general, the literal force of an utterance results from fine-tuning the speech act potential encoded by the grammatical mood of the sentence uttered by the speaker or, if the utterance is explicitly performative in its form, indicated by the performative verb used.

The literal force of an utterance characterises the direct speech act performed by the speaker; consistently, any other function that can be ascribed to the speaker's utterance characterises her indirect speech acts. In short, each multifunctional utterance constitutes at least two speech acts: one direct and the other indirect. (Of course, there are no principal limits on the number of indirect speech acts that can be performed in making an individual utterance.) For instance, in uttering (4) the speaker *directly* asks a question about the hearer's ability and *indirectly* makes a request; speaker B who utters (5b) *directly* informs A that she has to study for an exam and *indirectly* refuses his suggestion.[2] It is also argued that one of the indirect functions of an utterance can be the primary effect the speaker intends to produce. That is to say, the primary intended function of a speech act can go beyond its literal and direct force (Searle 1979) or its possible pragmatic modulations (Jaszczolt 2016). For instance, the primary goal behind an utterance of (4) is not to ask a question, but to make a request, and the primary function of B's utterance of (5b) is not to inform that B has to study for an exam, but to refuse A's suggestion and, at the same time, to explain or justify this refusal.

[2] The idea of indirect speech acts is the subject of much controversy. Bertolet (1994) and Green (2020) argue, for instance, that even though utterances of (4) are standardly treated as if they were requests, they do not constitute indirect illocutionary acts; more specifically, even though the utterances under discussion implicate – i.e., indicate or expresses – that the speaker has a *desire* that the hearer passes the salt, they do not produce normative effects characteristic of the illocutionary act of requesting. In other words, Bertolet and Green would agree that utterances of (4) are multifunctional and exhibit a kind of indirectness; what they reject, however, is the Serlean idea that their indirect function is to be described in illocutionary terms. In this paper we remain neutral with respect to the question whether there are indirect illocutionary acts. For the sake of convenience, however, we use the term 'force' to refer to direct and indirect functions of utterances constituting illocutionary acts.

One of the central problems of pragmatics is that the linguistically encoded content of the speaker's utterance underdetermines the meaning she intends to communicate (Wilson and Sperber 2012; Jaszczolt 2016; Witek 2015b). In particular, it underdetermines the primary function of her speech act. In other words, quite often the primary function of an utterance results from pragmatically fine-tuning its linguistically determined speech act potential or even goes beyond its direct and literal force. According to some scholars (Wilson and Sperber 2012; Carston 2002; Wharton 2009; Scott et al. 2019), to solve this and similar underdeterminacies the hearer performs pragmatic inferences aimed at the recognition of the speaker's communicative intentions and goals. It is also claimed that in inferring the primary function of the speaker's utterance the hearer makes use of a number of cues provided or exploited by the speaker, which may be lexical, contextual, gestural, kinesic, and — what is of crucial importance for us — prosodic (Wharton 2003, 2009, 2012).

In this paper we address the above-mentioned problem of linguistic underdeterminacy. It is worth stressing, however, that our focus is not so much on the structure of the pragmatic inference whereby the hearer recognizes the speaker's primary intention, as on the efficiency of prosodic cues provided by the speaker in inferring the dialogue-specific function of her utterance. Before we get into the details, however, it is instructive to explicate four theoretical assumptions underlying the proposed study.

First, we assume that utterance comprehension in general and speech act assignment in particular is a process that consists in (*i*) evaluating a number of alternative interpretations which are available to the hearer and (*ii*) selecting one of them as the intended one. This is not to say that the hearer has to evaluate a wide range of possible interpretation. As Giora (1997: 184) claims, "salient meanings are processed first". Therefore, the hearer considers a small number of *salient* alternatives and stops when he arrives at an interpretation that satisfy certain expectations, e.g., his expectations of relevance (Wilson and Sperber 2012), discourse coherence (Asher and Lascarides 2003), or cooperativity (Grice 1989).

Second, following Wharton (2009) and Wilson and Wharton (2006), we take it that "one of the main functions of prosody is to guide the utterance interpretation process by altering the salience of possible interpretations of utterances (including (…) speech-act ascriptions)." (Wharton 2009: 141) More specifically, we assume that the function of prosodic cues is to trigger and guide the hearer's inferential process directed at the recognition of the primary though 'indirect or non-literal' function of the speaker's utterance; in short, prosodic information can alter "the salience of possible interpretations of utterances." (Wharton 2009: 141)

Third, following Wilson and Sperber (2012: 23-24), we assume that possible interpretations of the function of an utterance — i.e., possible speech act assignments — take the form of higher-level explicatures such as (6a), (6b) and (6c), which represent conversational moves made in uttering sentence (5b):

(6) a. B *informs* that she has to study for an exam.
b. B *refuses* A's suggestion.
c. B *explains* why she refuses A's suggestion.

The verbs highlighted in italics express concepts that stands for types of dialogue-specific functions that can be assigned to the utterance of (5b).

Fourth, we assume that normally the higher-level explicatures of the speaker's utterance are not consciously entertained by the hearer. That is to say, normally the hearer has no conscious access to the concepts which, like *informing*, *refusing*, and *explaining*, represent discursive functions ascribed to the speaker's utterance. Like Asher and Lascarides (2001, 2003), however, we assume that that the primary or, more accurately, dialogue-specific function of an utterance can be spelled out in terms of how it is related to other contributions to the discourse of which it forms a part. For instance, the utterance of (1b) stands in the rhetorical relation of *Request-Elaboration* to the utterance of (1a), and the force of the utterance of (2b) with respect to the utterance of (2a) can be represented as the relation of *Question-Elaboration* (Asher and Lascarides 2001, 2003). In short, the dialogue-specific function of a conversational move can be spelled out by reference to the way it is rhetorically related to other contributions to the ongoing discourse. That is why we assume that the understanding of the primary function of a target utterance is reliably manifested in the hearer's ability to recognize the dialogical context from which it comes. For this reason, we do not expect participants in the study to use speech act verbs to describe dialogical functions of target utterances, but ask them to decide which one of two alternative dialogues displayed on the screen can, in their opinion, be qualified as the appropriate context of the heard utterance.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Preparatory stage

The study was carried out in Polish. At its preparatory stage, we constructed 7 target sentences: 4 interrogatives, 1 imperative, and 2 indicatives, including 1 explicit performative sentence. The list of target sentences is shown in Table 1 below.

| | **Polish sentence used in the study** | **English translation** |
|---|---|---|
| $TS_1$ | Myślisz, że możesz prowadzić? | Do you think you can drive? |
| $TS_2$ | Zaraz przyjdzie tata. | Dad is coming soon. |
| $TS_3$ | Dobrze się czujesz? | Is everything OK with you? |
| $TS_4$ | Otwórz okno! | Open the window! |
| $TS_5$ | Byłaś w Złotych Tarasach? | Have you been to Złote Tarasy?[3] |
| $TS_6$ | Obiecuję ci to. | I promise you that. |
| $TS_7$ | Odczepisz się? | Will you get off my back?[4]<br>Will you unhook yourself? |

**Table 1.** Target sentences used in the study and their English translations

For each target sentence, we constructed two alternative dialogical contexts. As a result, we have got 14 target utterances, each of which can be represented "as the pairing of a sentence and a context, namely the context in which the sentence was uttered" (Levinson 1983: 18). It is instructive to stress that the target utterances under discussion have different dialogue-specific functions; that is to say, for each target sentence there are two alternative target utterances that differ significantly in respect of the roles they play in their dialogical contexts. The list of dialogical contexts of target utterances is shown in Table 2 below; contexts are marked with capital letters, target sentences are highlighted in bold.

| TS | **Dialogical context used in the study** | **English translation** |
|---|---|---|
| $TS_1$ | **A.** Piotr na weselu swojej bratanicy wypił dużą ilość alkoholu. Gdy impreza dobiega końca, wyjmuje z kieszeni kluczyki do samochodu i chwiejnym krokiem idzie w kierunku srebrnego Golfa. Panna młoda, która właśnie żegna się ze swoimi rodzicami, zauważa, że wujek chyba zamierza wsiąść za kierownicę samochodu. Przerywa rozmowę i zwraca się do gościa.<br>— Wujek! Gdzie idziesz? | **A.** Peter drank a large amount of alcohol at his niece's wedding. The party is over. He takes his car keys out of his pocket and stumbles over to his silver Golf. The bride, who is just saying goodbye to her parents, noticed that her uncle is likely to be behind the wheel of the car. She interrupts the conversation and turns to the guest.<br>— "Uncle Peter! Where are you going?"<br>— "What do you mean?! I'm going home!" |

[3] Złote Tarasy (Golden Terraces) is a famous shopping mall in the centre of Warsaw, Poland.
[4] The literal English translation of the Polish sentence "Odczepisz się?" is "Will you unhook yourself?"; however, when uttered to a bothersome and intrusive intruder with the intention to get rid of him or her, it should be translated as "Will you get off my back?".

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | — Jak to gdzie?! Do domu jadę!<br>— Ledwo idziesz! **Myślisz, że możesz prowadzić?**<br>— Daj spokój dziecko!<br>— Poczekaj Piotr, my Cię odwieziemy! – Zwraca się do brata mama panny młodej. – No to pa kochani, lecimy!<br>— Cześć! | — "You can barely walk! **Do you think you can drive?**"<br>— "Oh, come on sweetheart!"<br>— "Wait Peter, we'll give you a ride!" — The mother of the bride says. — "Well, we have to go. Bye bye!"<br>— "Bye bye mom!" |
| | **B**. Marta tydzień temu przyleciała do Bostonu. Dziś idzie na rozmowę o pracę jako opiekunka. Po rozmowie z rodzicami, idzie do pokoju dzieci, aby poznać Kevina i Mayę. Rodzice bliźniaków zaczęli zastanawiać się, czy Marta może prowadzić samochód w Stanach. Kobieta zwraca się do dziewczyny z pytaniem.<br>— Czy masz amerykańskie prawo jazdy?<br>— Nie, polskie.<br>— **Myślisz, że możesz prowadzić?**<br>— Nie wszędzie, na szczęście tutaj mogę.<br>— Świetnie, to przyjdź jutro na 9.<br>— W porządku. | **B**. Marta has been in Boston for a week. Today she went to an interview for a job as a babysitter. After the conversation with the childrens' parents, she went to Kevin's and Maya's room to meet them. The twins' parents are wondering whether Marta could drive in the States. The woman turns to the girl and ask:<br>— "Do you have an American driving license?"<br>— "No, Polish."<br>— "**Do you think you can drive?**"<br>— "Not everywhere, but I can here."<br>— "Great, so you're starting tomorrow at 9."<br>— "Perfect." |
| $TS_2$ | **C**. Dziś na kolację do Kwiatkowskich przychodzą rodzice Kasi. Kobieta idzie do pokojów córek, sprawdzić czy są gotowe na przyjście gości. Julia i Alicja skończyły już porządkować zabawki i wybierają sukienki na dzisiejszy wieczór. Mama wchodzi do pokoju najstarszej córki.<br>—„Kamila! Co to jest za bałagan?<br>— Mamo! Nie jestem głodna, chcę zostać w pokoju.<br>— Ty chyba sobie żartujesz! Już ruszaj się i zbieraj te ciuchy z podłogi!<br>— Oj mamo daj mi spokój<br>— Dziecko! **Zaraz przyjdzie tata.**<br>— Dobra już sprzątam.<br>— Za 5 minut widzę cię na dole! | **C**. Kate's parents are coming to her place for dinner. The woman goes to her daughters' rooms to check if they are ready to receive the guests. Julia and Alicia have already cleaned up up the toys and they are choosing dresses for tonight. Mom enters the room of the oldest daughter.<br>— "Camila! Why is it still so messy here?"<br>— "Mom! I am not hungry, I want to stay in my room."<br>— "You must be kidding! Get moving and pick up those clothes from the floor!"<br>— "Oh, mom, leave me alone."<br>— "Sweetheart! **Dad is coming soon.**"<br>— "Okay, I'm cleaning up."<br>— "See you downstairs in 5 minutes!" |
| | **D**. Weronika skończyła lekcje i czeka na szkolnym korytarzu na młodszą siostrę. Przychodzi Zosia i mówi:<br>— Cześć! Idziemy dziś po lekcjach na gimnastykę?<br>— Nie. Dziś zajęcia są odwołane, jest remont sali.<br>— Ah! Szkoda, myślałam, że zacznę dzisiaj ćwiczyć nowy układ z szarfą.<br>— Zaraz przyjdzie tata. Pojedziemy z nim na zakupy i możemy zaproponować wieczór filmowy, to też jest fajna opcja.<br>— O! Już jest. Chodź Weronika! | **D**. Veronica has finished her lessons. She is waiting in the school corridor for her younger sister. Sophia comes and says:<br>— "Hi! Are we going to a gymnastics class today?"<br>— "No. The gym is under renovation. The class is cancelled."<br>— "Ah! What a pity. I thought today I would be able to practice the new dance with a sash."<br>— "**Dad is coming soon.** We will go shopping with him and we can offer a movie night. This is also a nice option."<br>— "He's already here. Come on, Veronica!" |
| $TS_3$ | **E**. Kamil przegląda oferty biura podróży. Niezadowolony zwraca się do narzeczonej: | **E**. Kamil is browsing the travel agency's offers. He is turning dissatisfied to his fiancée and says: |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | — Daria, w naszym budżecie jest tylko Egipt, Turcja i Tunezja.<br>– Aż tak źle? — Pyta Daria, podchodząc do komputera.<br>— No a ten? — Wskazuje palcem na jeden z hoteli<br>— Zobacz, dobra cena i dobra lokalizacja.<br>— Proszę Cię, to jest Egipt, tam w środku sezonu będzie masa turystów!<br>— Lepsze to niż nic! Chyba, że masz lepszy pomysł?<br>Kamil po chwili namysłu: — Daria, a może by tak zrezygnować z tego hucznego wesela i za te pieniądze wybrać się, powiedzmy, na… Kubę!<br>— **Dobrze się czujesz?** Twoja matka nie wybaczyłaby mi tego do końca życia! Egipt jest OK, będzie fajnie! | — "Daria, our budget includes only Egypt, Turkey and Tunisia."<br>— "That bad? What about this one?" — She is pointing a finger at one of the hotels. — "Look, good price and good location."<br>— "Oh, this is Egypt, in the middle of the season there will be a lot of tourists!"<br>— "This is better than nothing! Unless you have a better idea?"<br>Kamil, after a moment of reflection: — "Daria, maybe we should give up this great wedding, save the money and go to... Cuba!"<br>— "**Is everything OK with you?** Your mother wouldn't forgive me that for the rest of her life! Egypt is OK, it will be fun!" |
| | **F**. Przy wigilijnym stole siedzi rodzina Nowaków. Nastał czas rozdawania prezentów. Najmłodsze dzieci z radością klękają przed choinką i zaczynają wygrzebywać paczki spod gałęzi. Dziadek Henryk zwraca się do swojej starszej córki.<br>— Ewa, przynieś mi proszę szklankę wody.<br>— Tato, coś się stało? **Dobrze się czujesz?**<br>— Trochę słabo mi się zrobiło, ale może tu jest po prostu duszo.<br>— Proszę, woda. Już otwieram okno. | **F**. A family is sitting at the Christmas table. It's time for Christmas gifts. The youngest children kneel in front of the tree and are scooping out packages from under the branches. Grandfather Henryk talks to his older daughter:<br>— "Eva, please bring me a glass of water."<br>— "Dad, what is going on? **Is everything OK with you?**"<br>— "I feel dizzy but maybe it's just too stuffy here."<br>— "Water for you. I'm opening the window." |
| TS4 | **G**. Agata ze swoją babcią Gosią gotują duży, niedzielny obiad. W kuchni jest coraz cieplej, temperatura powoli staje się nieznośna. Do kuchni wchodzi Sandra, córka Gosi, a mama Agaty.<br>— Sandro, obróć kotlety, ja usiądę na chwilę. – Mówi starsza kobieta. Siada na małym taborecie i w jednej chwili osuwa się na stolik. Jej córka szybko reaguje.<br>— Agata! Babcia zemdlała! **Otwórz okno!**<br>Dziewczyna energicznie otwiera okno. Sandra na szczęście nie musi długo cucić swojej mamy.<br>— Mamo, chodź, pomogę Ci przejść na kanapę. Długo stałaś w kuchni. Połóż się i odpocznij. | **G**. Agatha and her grandmother are cooking a big Sunday dinner. In the kitchen it is getting warmer and the temperature is becoming unbearable. Sandra, Agatha's mother, enters the kitchen.<br>— "Sandra, turn the chops, I'll sit down for a while." — The older woman says. She sits down on a small chair and in an instant collapses on the table. Her daughter is quick to respond.<br>— "Agatha! Grandma passed out! **Open the window!**"<br>The girl quickly opens the window. Luckily, Sandra doesn't have to revive her mother for a long time.<br>— "Mom, come on, I'll help you get on the couch. You stood in the kitchen for a long time. Lie down and rest." |
| | **H**. Paweł podnosi rękę i pyta nauczycielkę, czy może otworzyć okno. Ta choć wie, że przewietrzenie sali to dobry pomysł, prosi chłopca, by na razie wstrzymał się z tym działaniem. W klasie jest dyrektorka szkoły, która boi się przeciągów. Kiedy wychodzi, zniecierpliwiony Paweł pyta.<br>— A teraz mogę?<br>— **Otwórz okno.** — Odpowiada kobieta. | **H**. Paul raises his hand and asks the teacher whether he can open the window. Teacher knows it is a good idea to ventilate the room, but she asks the boy to wait. The principal who is afraid of drafts is in the classroom. When she leaves, an impatient Paul asks:<br>— "What about now? Can I?"<br>— "**Open the window.**" — The woman answers. |
| | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| $TS_5$ | **I**. Hanna postanowiła kupić swojemu bratu na urodziny słuchawki. Była w kilku sklepach elektronicznych ale nie znalazła odpowiednich. W przeddzień przyjęcia podchodzi do taty i ze zrezygnowaniem mówi.<br>— Tato, byłam w 5 sklepach, nigdzie nie ma tych słuchawek dla Adama. Może Ty masz pomysł, gdzie mogłabym jeszcze ich poszukać?<br>— **Byłaś w Złotych Tarasach?**<br>— To jest myśl! – Wykrzyknęła Hania. Spojrzała na zegarek, szybkim ruchem wsunęła trampki i wybiegła z domu. | **I**. Hanna decided to buy headphones for her brother's birthday. She has been in several electronics stores but still didn't find the right one. The day before the party, she talks with her father:<br>— "Dad, I've been to 5 stores. I cannot find these headphones for Adam. Maybe you have an idea where I could look for them?"<br>— "**Have you been to Złote Tarasy?**"<br>— "Good idea!" — Hanna exclaimed. She looked at her watch, quickly slipped on her sneakers, and ran out of the house. |
| | **J**. Wiktoria spędziła cały sierpień u swojej babci w Warszawie. Pierwszego dnia szkoły koleżanki z klasy dopytywały, jak się mieszkało miesiąc w stolicy.<br>— Widziałaś kogoś sławnego? Jakiegoś aktora albo piosenkarza? — Pyta Maja.<br>— Tak! Widziałam Margaret na Starówce!<br>— Wow! A byłaś na zakupach? **Byłaś w Złotych Tarasach?** — Pyta Maciek.<br>— No jasne! Babcia mnie zabrała na babski wypad: zakupy, kino, lody. Było super! | **J**. Victoria spent all August in Warsaw with her grandmother. On the first day of school, her classmates asked how it was to live in the capital for a month.<br>— "Have you seen someone famous? Some actor or singer?" —Maya asks.<br>— "Yes! I saw Margaret in the old town!"<br>— "Wow! Were you shopping? **Have you been to Złote Tarasy?**" — Maciek asks.<br>— "Sure! Grandma took me on a girl's trip: shopping, cinema, ice cream. It was great!" |
| $TS_6$ | **K**. Rodzice Zuzi właśnie wrócili z wywiadówki.<br>– Zuzka przyjdź do nas! – Woła tato z salonu.<br>– Dziecko, dobrze wiesz jaka była umowa. Są dobre oceny, są tańce. Nie ma dobrych ocen, rezygnujemy z zajęć. Rozumiemy się?<br>– Tak tato.<br>– Masz jeszcze miesiąc na poprawienie swojej średniej przed wystawianiem próbnych ocen. Jeśli nie będziesz miała przynajmniej 4.0, nici z obozu tanecznego!<br>– No ale tato… już wpłaciliśmy zaliczkę!<br>– Nieważne. Nie będziesz miała 4.0, nie pojedziesz na obóz. **Obiecuję Ci to!** Zrozumiałaś?<br>– Tak. | **K**. Sue's parents have just returned from the parents' evening.<br>— "Sue, come to us!" — Her father is calling from the living room.<br>— "Child, you know what the deal was. There are good grades, there are dance classes. You don't have good grades, we drop out of the dance course. Do we understand each other?"<br>— "Yes, Dad."<br>— "You have one month to improve your grade average before receiving your proposed grades. If you don't have at least B, you won't go to the dance camp."<br>— "But Dad… we have already made a payment!"<br>— "It doesn't matter. No B, no camp. **I promise you that!** Did you get it?"<br>— "Yes." |
| | **L**. Nikodem od lat marzy o psie. Kilka dni temu kuzyn chłopca, Wincent, otrzymał na swoje 11 urodziny wymarzony prezent, słodkiego Yorka. Temat zwierzaka powrócił.<br>— Mamo, mam już 13 lat, Wincent ma 11 i może mieć swojego psa. Czemu ja nie mogę?<br>— Kochanie, oni mają ogródek, mogą pieska na niego wypuścić. My mieszkamy w centrum miasta. Musiałabyś wychodzić z nim 3 razy dziennie. Myślisz, że dasz radę wstawać codziennie co najmniej pół godziny wcześniej niż zazwyczaj i wychodzić z nim na spacery nawet w zimie? | **L**. Nikodem has been dreaming about a dog for years. A few days ago, his cousin, Vincent, received his dream gift for her 11th birthday: a sweet York. The pet topic is back.<br>— "Mom, I'm 13, Vincent is 11 and he can have a dog. Why can't I?"<br>— "Honey, they have a garden, they can just let their dog out. We live in the city centre. You would have to walk the dog 3 times a day. Do you think you will be able to get up at least half hour earlier than usual, every day? Will you go for walks with the dog, even in winter?" |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | — Tak! Dam radę, nawet jak będzie zima, będę z nim wychodzić. **Obiecuję Ci to!**<br>— Dobrze, tata wróci, to porozmawiam z nim. | — "Yes, I will! I can do it! Even in winter. **I promise you that!**"<br>— "OK, dad will come back, so I'll talk to him." |
| $TS_7$ | **M**. Natalia z Adrianem siedzą przy barze. Do dziewczyny podchodzi ewidentnie zainteresowany nią, pijany mężczyzna. Natalia zdawkowo odpowiada na jego pytania i odwraca się do Adriana, aby kontynuować z nim rozmowę. Stara się ignorować kolejne zaczepki. Mężczyzna nie daje za wygraną i łapie Natalię za ramię. W tym momencie zdenerwowany Adrian wstaje i popycha mężczyznę.<br>— **Odczepisz się?** — Krzyczy do nieznajomego.<br>— Spokojnie, przecież nic się nie stało. — Mówi ledwo stojący o własnych siłach mężczyzna. – Do widzenia państwu. | **M**. Natalia and Adrian are sitting at the bar. A drunk man approaches the girl. He is evidently interested in her. Natalia casually answers his questions and turns to Adrian to continue their conversation. She tries to ignore the harassments but the man does not give up and grabs Natalia by the arm. Then nervous Adrian gets up and pushes the man.<br>— "**Will you get off my back?**" — Adrian shouts at the stranger.<br>— "Relax, nothing happened." — The man says.<br>— "Goodbye." |
| | **N**. Dziesięcioletni Łukasz jest na swoich pierwszych zajęcia ze wspinaczki. Pod koniec treningu udało mu się wejść na samą górę ścianki dla początkujących. Z obolałymi ramionami i drżącymi dłońmi zjeżdża powoli na linie. Trenerka klepie go po plecach i gratuluje udanego treningu.<br>— Jak na pierwszy raz to naprawdę świetnie ci poszło!<br>— Dziękuję! – Odpowiada z dumą chłopiec.<br>— Pójdę porozmawiać z Twoimi rodzicami. Dasz sobie sam radę? **Odczepisz się?** – Pyta, wskazując palcem na uprząż.<br>— Tak, spokojnie. | **N**. Ten-year-old Lukas attends to his first climbing class. At the end of the training, he managed to climb to the very top of the wall for beginners. His shoulders are sore and his hands are trembling. He descends slowly down the rope. The trainer taps him on the back and congratulates him on a successful training.<br>— "It was your first training and you did so well!"<br>— "Thank you!" — The boy replies proudly.<br>— "I'll go talk to your parents. **Will you unhook yourself?**" — He asks, pointing at the harness.<br>— "Yes, I will. I can do it." |

**Table 2.** Dialogical contexts of target sentences

We invited 16 Polish native speakers (9 females) to participate in the preparatory stage of the study. Each of them was asked to read aloud every dialogue as if he or she had been an actor interpreting a fragment of a script. We did not inform the readers about the exact objective of the study; in particular, we did not draw their attention to target sentences. The readers agreed to register their performances. As a result, we got 16 different recorded performances of each of the 14 constructed dialogues.

Next, we cut out those fragments of the recordings that corresponded to target utterances. As a result, we got 16 different cut-out recordings of each of the 14 target utterances. Consequently, the cut-out recordings were grouped into 14 categories each of which contained 16 elements. To identify a specific performance of a target utterance, we marked it with the capital letter representing the dialogue from which it came and the number of the respective reader. For instance 'A6' stands for the target utterance that comes from dialogue A and was performed by reader 6.

Finally, we constructed a set of acoustic stimuli for the purposes of the experimental part of the study. To this end, we analysed the cut-out recordings to identify their prosodic features such as intonation contour and pitch range. Within each category we singled out recordings whose prosodic features were typical for it; that is to say, we rejected extreme and idiosyncratic results that did not match observed patterns. Next, for each pair of alternative dialogues — e.g., A *versus* B, C *versus* D, and so on — we selected two readers whose utterances were typical for the respective categories. As a result, we received the following collection of 28 recordings to be used in the empirical part of the study:

*A6, A7, B6, B7*
*C1, C4, D1, D4*
*E10, E6, F10, F6*
*G1, G3, H1, H3*
**I13, I14, J13, J14**
**K13, K8, L13, L8**
**M13, M14, N13, N14**

Utterances highlighted in italics were performed by female readers, whereas utterances highlighted in bold were performed by male readers.

### 3.2. Experimental stage

The empirical part of the study was created as an OpenSesame experiment and carried out on-line[5] with 47 Polish native speakers (33 females). Each participant was asked to ensure that during the experiment he or she would have access to the Internet, a computer, and headphones; he or she was also asked to switch off his or her phone and find a quiet place where no one would disturb him or her for at least 30 minutes.

After a short tutorial, the participants were invited to the main part of the study which consisted of 28 trials divided into 4 equal blocks. In each trial we used a different acoustic stimulus which came from the collection of cut-out recordings constructed at the preparatory

[5] Originally, we planned to conduct the study in a laboratory. Due to the restrictions introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19, however, the laboratory was closed and we had to carry out the experimental part of the study on-line.

stage of the study. More specifically, in each trial a participant was presented with a pair of alternative dialogical contexts of a certain target sentence; one of the dialogues was displayed on the left half of the screen, whereas the other on its right half; the target sentence was highlighted in bold. The participant was asked to read the dialogues carefully and, next, to press the 'S' key to play a recorded utterance of the target sentence. His or her task was to decide which of the two displayed dialogues the heard utterance came from and express his or her decision by pressing an appropriate key: '1' for the dialogue on the left, or '2' for the dialogue on the right. Upon completion of each block the participant was informed how many trials were still left.

The list of trials is shown below (for instance, 'AB_A6' stands for a trial in which participants were presented with dialogues A and B and heard recording A6). In each experiment cycle the trials were used in a random order without repetitions;

AB_A6, AB_A7, AB_B6, AB_B7
CD_C1, CD_C4, CD_D1, CD_D4
EF_E10, EF_E6, EF_F10, EF_F6
GH_G1, GH_G3, GH_H1, GH_H3
IJ_I13, IJ_I14, IJ_J13, IJ_J14
KL_K13, KL_K8, KL_L13, KL_L8
MN_M13, MN_M14, MN_N13, MN_N14

The main goal of the experiment was to measure the accuracy of the participants' decisions and thereby to test whether they use prosodic information effectively to infer dialogue-specific functions of speech acts.

## 4. Results

The detailed data collected during the study are presented in Appendix. The obtained results revealed that average accuracy with which the participants recognized contexts of target utterances — and, by the same token, the efficiency with which they used prosodic cues to infer their dialogue-specific functions — is 76%.

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test ($Z = 5{,}92$, $p < 0{,}001$) shows that the obtained data differ significantly from the chance level (50%) and thereby suggests that the participants in

the study relied on prosodic cues in recognizing functions of target utterances. In addition, based on the results of Cochran's Q test ($\chi^2(27) = 207.95$, $p < 0{,}001$), we can say that there are significant differences in accuracy between different dialogues. Post hoc analysis was performed using Dunn's test.

A more detailed discussion of the obtained results is presented in the next section.

## 5. Discussion. The specificity-bias effect

The data gathered in the empirical part of the study suggest that hearers effectively use prosodic information provided by speakers in inferring occasion-specific functions of their speech acts. In other words, hypothesis ($h_1$) is confirmed. In each trial, participants were presented with two dialogical contexts which, in our view, activated two different higher-level explicatures of a target utterance. Following Wharton (2009), we also assume that prosodic information provided by the target utterance modified the distribution of salience among available speech act ascriptions and thereby affected the participants' decisions.

The study reveals, however, that there are target utterances whose prosodic features do not prove to be effective indicators of their dialogue-specific functions; more specifically, their efficiency is well below the average level. Namely, for some target utterances there is a considerable number of *failed cases* in which participants misrecognized their actual forces. In our view, at least some of the failed cases exhibit a common pattern that can be described in terms of differences in salience between alternative interpretations available to participants. Following Rachel Giora (1997; 2003), we assume that meaning salience is a matter of degree and that "salient meanings are processed first" (1997: 184). We also assume that the salience of a given speech act ascription is a positive function of its specificity. Our second hypothesis, then, is that ($h_2$) specific speech act assignments are prioritised in interpretation over general ones; more specifically, if participants have access to two alternative interpretations of a target utterance — one specific and pragmatically fine-tuned and the other general and linguistically indicated — they show preference for the former over the latter. In sum, at least in some cases the salience of an available force ascription is a positive function of its specificity rather than of its literalness.

Hypothesis ($h_2$) casts light on a certain effect which we observed in the study; that is to say, it enables us to explain cases in which interpreters, who had access to both specific and general interpretations of a speech act, ignored prosodic cues that indicated the latter and

chose the former as the operative one; in short, they seemed to be subject to a kind of *specificity bias*.

By way of illustration, let us discuss some of the failed cases identified in the study. In Table 3 we consider target utterances — which are represented as pairings of target sentences and dialogical contexts — and describe their dialogue-specific functions.

| Target utterance | Dialogue-specific function |
|---|---|
| ⟨$TS_1$, A⟩ | a rhetorical question which is an attempt to restrain uncle Peter from driving a car |
| ⟨$TS_1$, B⟩ | an interview question asked to find out more about the candidate for job |
| ⟨$TS_2$, C⟩ | a threat made for the purpose of persuading Camila to clean her room up (part of the mother's *ad baculum* argument) |
| ⟨$TS_2$, D⟩ | a case of informing which is part of making a plan |
| ⟨$TS_3$, E⟩ | a rhetorical question which takes effect as a negative evaluation and firm rejection of Kamil's proposal |
| ⟨$TS_3$, F⟩ | a question about well-being which expresses Eva's anxiety about her father |
| ⟨$TS_4$, G⟩ | an order |
| ⟨$TS_4$, H⟩ | a permission |
| ⟨$TS_5$, I⟩ | a question asked to help Hana to elaborate plan for achieving her goal (the relational force of *Question-Elaboration*, see Asher and Lascarides 2001, 2003) |
| ⟨$TS_5$, J⟩ | a genuine question asked to find out more about Victoria's vacation in Warsaw |
| ⟨$TS_6$, K⟩ | a threat made for the purpose of persuading Sue to perform better in school (part of the father's *ad baculum* argument) |
| ⟨$TS_6$, L⟩ | a promise made in an attempt to persuade the mother to buy a dog |
| ⟨$TS_7$, M⟩ | a rhetorical question which is an attempt to get the bothersome intruder to stop harassing Natalia |
| ⟨$TS_7$, N⟩ | a question asked to find out whether Lukas needs help |

**Table 3.** Target utterances and their dialogue-specific functions

Let us focus on target sentences $TS_1$, $TS_2$, and $TS_5$. It is worth noting that each of them is uttered in two characteristically different contexts: ($c_1$) one suggesting that the primary goal behind uttering the target sentence is to perform an indirect *or* non-literal speech act whose pragmatically inferred function is highly specific and supplements *or* substitutes its literally-specified force (see contexts A, C, and I), and ($c_2$) the other suggesting that the target sentence is used to perform a direct and literal speech act, i.e., the act whose primary force is *linguistically specified* or at least *linguistically constrained* (see contexts B, D, and J). As a result, utterances ⟨$TS_1$, A⟩, ⟨$TS_2$, C⟩, and ⟨$TS_5$, I⟩ have highly specific and indirect or non-literal functions, whereas the functions ascribed to utterances ⟨$TS_1$, B⟩, ⟨$TS_2$, D⟩, and ⟨$TS_5$, J⟩ are direct and fit their linguistically determined force potentials: ⟨$TS_1$, B⟩ and ⟨$TS_5$, J⟩ are direct and literal *genuine* questions, i.e., requests for providing some kind of information (Bach and Harnish 1979: 47; Searle 1979), whereas ⟨$TS_2$, D⟩ contributes to the family informatives, which are standardly considered to constitute a subtype of constatives (Bach and Harnisch 1979: 42).

The empirical part of the study (see Table 4. below) shows that there are more failed cases in contexts of the ($c_1$) type, i.e., B, D, and J, than in contexts of the ($c_2$) type, i.e., A, C, and I. That is to say, in considerable numbers of cases utterances ⟨$TS_1$, B⟩, ⟨$TS_2$, D⟩, and ⟨$TS_5$, J⟩ were *inaccurately* ascribed general forces that fitted the potentials associated with sentences $TS_1$, $TS_2$, and $TS_5$, whereas the respective numbers of inaccurate interpretations of utterances ⟨$TS_1$, A⟩, ⟨$TS_2$, C⟩, and ⟨$TS_5$, I⟩ were smaller.

| **Target utterance** | **Performance** | **Inaccurate interpretations of performances** | **Inaccurate interpretations of target utterances** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ⟨$TS_1$, A⟩ | AB_A6 | 6% | 18% |
| | AB_A7 | 30% | |
| ⟨$TS_1$, B⟩ | AB_B6 | 21% | 23% |
| | AB_B7 | 26% | |
| ⟨$TS_2$, C⟩ | CD_C1 | 6% | 16% |
| | CD_C4 | 26% | |
| ⟨$TS_2$, D⟩ | CD_D1 | 21% | 38% |
| | CD_D4 | 64% | |
| ⟨$TS_5$, I⟩ | IJ_I13 | 19% | 13% |
| | IJ_I14 | 6% | |
| ⟨$TS_5$, J⟩ | IJ_J13 | 32% | 52% |
| | IJ_J14 | 72% | |

**Table 4.** Results for three failed cases

In sum, the results obtained for three pairs of utterances — ⟨$TS_1$, A⟩ *versus* ⟨$TS_1$, B⟩, ⟨$TS_2$, C⟩ *versus* ⟨$TS_2$, D⟩, and ⟨$TS_5$, I⟩ *versus* ⟨$TS_5$, J⟩ — follow a certain pattern that can be called the *specificity-bias effect*: some participants seemed to ignore prosodic cues that indicated linguistically-specified *general* force assignments and came up with more *specific* pragmatically fine-tuned interpretations. The specificity-bias effect is analogous to the so-called lexical bias effect (Matsui 2019: 236). In the case of the latter — which can be observed, for instance, for cases in which hearers fail to recognize speakers' ironic intentions — marked prosody is ignored and lexical content is prioritised in interpretation; in the case of the former, by contrast, the hears exhibit a tendency to depart from literal interpretations — which are associated with unmarked prosody — and come up with more specialized ones.

One possible explanation of the observed specificity-bias effect is provided by hypothesis ($h_2$). It suffices to assume, following Giora (1997, 2003), that salient

interpretations come first and, next, hypothesize that in some cases the salience of speech act assignments is a positive function of their specificity rather than literalness. Of course the proposed explanation is speculative and more empirical work has to be done to support hypothesis ($h_2$). Nevertheless, it is intuitively appealing. Normally, we use indicative, interrogative, and imperative sentences not so much to merely assert something, ask a question, and issue an order, respectively, as to achieve more specific and dialogue-bound goals, some examples of which are shown in Table 3. As John L. Austin (1975) argued, for instance, there are no purely constative utterances construed as speech acts whose only point is to state the facts (for a more extensive discussion of this topic, see Sbisà 2007 and 2013); rather, there is a wide and divers family of specialised illocutions that in one way or another "have to 'correspond to facts' in order to comply with their standards of correctness" (Sbisà 2019: 34). Therefore, a competent discourse participants who considers a number of alternative interpretations, some of which are more specific than others, has a natural tendency to prefer the former over the latter.

According to hypothesis ($h_2$), the specificity-bias effect can be expected to occur only in cases in which an interpreted utterance activates a number of alternative speech act ascriptions which differ in respect of their specificity. Consider, for instance, utterances ⟨$TS_4$, G⟩ and ⟨$TS_4$, H⟩. They can be assigned with two equally general and literal forces — *making an order* and *giving permission*, respectively — which belong to the family of directives. In short, none of them is more specific than the other. Therefore, they did not give rise to the specificity-bias effect, but evoked roughly the same number of inaccurate interpretations (15% and 13%, respectively).

Finally, it is instructive to note that the pair ⟨$TS_6$, K⟩ *versus* ⟨$TS_6$, L⟩ exhibit the lexical-bias rather than specificity-bias effect: utterance ⟨$TS_6$, K⟩, which constitutes a threat made for the purpose of an *ad baculum* argument, evoked 49% of inaccurate interpretations, whereas utterance ⟨$TS_6$, K⟩, which is a promise, evoked merely 28% of inaccurate speech act assignments. One possible explanation of this effect is that some participants ignored prosodic cues and used lexical information instead. More specifically, they took into account the fact that sentence $TS_6$ is explicitly performative and by default ascribed to its utterances the force of making a promise which is named by its main verb.

In sum, verbal comprehension involves salience management. Normally, the distribution of salience among available interpretations, including available speech act

ascriptions, is affected by prosodic information provided by speakers. In some cases, however, it is susceptible to the specificity-bias and lexical-bias effects.

## 6. Conclusions. Perspectives for future research

Our main aim in this paper has been to evaluate the role of prosodic information provided by the speaker in inferring the occasion-specific function of her speech act. To this end, we designed and carried out an empirical study whereby we tested whether participants use prosodic cues effectively to recognize dialogue-specific functions of target utterances. In our view, the analysis of the obtained data confirms the central hypothesis of our paper according to which ($h_1$) prosodic cues are effective indicators of illocutionary forces.

In particular, the procedure we employed enabled us to measure whether participants used prosodic cues effectively to recognize discursive functions of speech acts independently of whether they were able to represent these functions in conscious thought and provide their accurate verbal description. We did not ask participants to use illocutionary verbs or nouns to report their interpretations; nor we asked them to choose among a range of alternative explicit speech act ascriptions. In our view, participants might vary in the way they understand illocutionary vocabulary and we did not want these differences to have any bearing on the results of our study. For this reason, we asked participants to read carefully two alternative dialogical contexts that involved a common target sentence, listen to a recording of the target sentence, and decide where the heard sentence came from. The basic assumption underlying this procedure is that normally there is a correspondence between the primary function of an utterance and the way it is related to other contributions to the discourse of which it forms a part (Asher and Lascarides 2001, 2003; see also Austin 1975: 117 and Witek 2015a and 2019).

The obtained data revealed a number of failed cases in which participants misinterpreted target utterances. We observed that some of the failed cases followed a certain pattern that we called the *specificity-bias effect*. That is to say, some participants seemed to ignore prosodic cues that were associated with linguistically-specified general forces and came up with more specific pragmatically fine-tuned interpretations. To explain the observed specificity-bias effect, we put forth hypothesis ($h_2$), according to which specific speech act ascriptions are prioritised in interpretation over general ones; more specifically, if a target utterance has two available interpretations that differ in respect of their specificity — i.e., one

is specific and pragmatically fine-tuned whereas the other is general and linguistically indicated — participants show preference for the former over the latter.

The paper leaves a number of questions open for future research. First, and most importantly, there is a need to carry out a more detailed analysis of prosodic cues that interact with lexical and contextual information in inferring dialogue-specific forces. For this reason, in our future study we would like to distinguish between main types of prosodic features — involving both linguistic and non-linguistic signs, signals and codes (Wharton 2003, 2009, 2012) — that affect speech act assignment and examine the effects of their possible combinations.

Second, hypothesis ($h_2$), which has been put forth to explain the observed specificity-bias effect, is, at least at the current stage of research, *ad hoc*: even though it is intuitively appealing, it has no independently tested predictions. For this reason, in our future research we would like to design an empirical study which would enable us to test more cases of the specificity-bias effect; we would also like to identify conditions under which the effect is likely to occur.

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